

Original Paper

**Ethics and diversity need to be considered in
successful international doctoral supervision**

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Abstract Rationale: To supervise the new generation of researchers with national and international doctoral backgrounds at universities in different contexts necessitates the formulation of not only cultural but ethical policies. Supervision of doctoral students is vulnerable because of inherent power-relationships. **Methods:** The Ethical Council at the Karolinska Institutet has published an ethical policy for supervision of doctoral students from other countries and cultures; a complement to the handbook for Successful Supervision – A Dialogue Facilitator (www.ki.se). Demand for cultural competence in supervision arose out of the increasing numbers of foreign PhD students at the Karolinska Institutet in recent years. However, all the statements in this document can be applied to doctoral students generally. The current article addresses the concepts of culture, cultural competence and ethics in supervision. It is recommended that both parts gain an understanding of each other's context before the registration of doctoral training. Further, the article takes up examples of successful and problematic supervision, examples of ethical dilemmas in supervision and how such are resolved, and ends with lessons learnt from the training of supervisors. **Findings and conclusions:** There is a need for diversity and transparency in a research training programme regarding roles, responsibilities and rights of supervisors and doctoral students, respectively. It is of significance that the universities involved follow a human rights' perspective and has an ethical policy as a tool to facilitate a dialogue between supervisor/s and doctoral student. A need for an annual forum for reflection together with doctoral students and other supervisor colleagues is highlighted.

Key words: culture, ethics, supervision, globalisation, doctoral students

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“The challenge for us all is to create a context in which two seemingly contradictory worldviews find expression.

The first tells us that we are all the same in our humanity – regardless of ethnic group, age, experience or social or political history.

The second tells us that we are vastly different, based on our culture, experience, history, group membership and identity

(Bullock, 2006)

INTRODUCTION Countries are currently involved in rapid and broad interaction dynamics. Globalisation processes on different levels thus have impacts on culturally diverse groups much more than ever before. The concept “Globalisation” was first coined to refer to the integration of national economies through trade and commerce flows. It now also refers to the movement of people and knowledge across borders. The challenge of globalization, when it is excluded and imbalanced from its economic context, is the threat of increasing inequality in access to resources and training (Bullock, 2006). Internationalisation of postgraduate education can contribute to the development of research, enhance ethnic diversity, promote the understanding of foreign cultures and traditions and support for universal human rights.

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Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, Sweden, was founded in 1810 and is one of Europe's largest medical universities. It is also Sweden's largest centre for medical training and research, accounting for 30 per cent of the medical training and 40 per cent of the medical academic research conducted nationwide. The research training offers students and postgraduate students opportunities to take part in advanced research under the supervision of established researchers (for more details, see Karolinska Institutet, International policy document, *online*).

A truly global supervision must be multifaceted and multicultural. To supervise this new generation of national and international doctoral students at universities in different contexts necessitates the formulation of not only cultural but ethical policies. Also, in view of the increase in distance learning at different levels of training and supervision, it is important to establish ethical principles at the university. One of the cornerstones of excellence in education and research is the ethical policy at the Karolinska Institutet. The task of the Karolinska Institutet's Ethical Council is, for instance, to actively promote the adherence to moral principles and to promote a deepened understanding of ethics among staff as well as a sound ethical approach. Against the background of improving people's health, principles for safeguarding children's health and development in teaching, research and clinical contexts have been established. It is KI's responsibility to call attention to shortcomings that pose short- and long-term threats to people's health. The document expounding these ideas emphasizes children's special vulnerability and includes the following four principles: complete and equal human dignity and worth; children's best interests are to be put first; children's right to life and development is to be guaranteed to the best of society's ability; and children's right to participation and influence, to have the opportunity to make their voice heard and to be able to affect their own situation and be shown respect (Karolinska Institutet, *online*). The Ethical council has also published an ethical policy for supervision of doctoral students from other countries and cultures (Karolinska Institutet, *online*). Demand for cultural competence in supervision arose out of the increasing numbers of foreign PhD students at KI in recent years. However, all the statements in this document can be applied to doctoral students generally. The practical problems and ethics involved in supervisor-supervisee relationships are challenging enough in instances in which the cultural background of supervisors and supervisees are similar. In cases where they are very different, and thus, when the supervisor is in one country and the supervisee in another, the complexities may multiply. In cross-national supervision, there are additional ethical and power issues between the different sponsoring universities and research institutes.

CULTURE DIFFERENCES AFFECT THE SUPERVISORY PROCESS The concept of culture is defined as, "the unique behaviour patterns and lifestyle shared by a group of people that distinguish it from other groups. A culture is characterized by a set of views, beliefs, values and attitudes" (Tseng & Strelzer, 2004: p 1). These shared behaviours and meanings are dynamic and undergo continuous changes and modifications in response to the changing context. According to Ellaway (2006), education is, for instance, highly culture-specific even if curricula and syllabi are not. Further, research in medicine is very similar but its organization is academic culture-specific. In the medical university research setting, three types of culture are present: (1) the culture of the doctoral student, (2) the culture of the supervisor, and (3) the academic culture in which the studies are carried out. The culture of the doctoral student, such as the student's expectation of the teacher/supervisor, motivation for studies, is influenced by the host culture and will shape the communication and interaction with others including the supervisor/s, teachers and other students. The culture of the supervisor will shape the pattern of communication and interaction with the doctoral student and colleagues. The culture of the supervisor has an impact

on his/her attitudes towards the student and colleagues, understanding of the student's problems, and coping. Communication problems that can lead to inadequate supervision arise when the cultures of the doctoral student and the supervisor engender different understandings. The academic culture includes regulations, customs and attitudes that have more or less quickly developed within the medical university. The supervisor as well as the doctoral student may be more or less unaware of the academic culture's influence on supervision. The problems arise in supervisor-doctoral student communication when the supervisor and the doctoral student do not share the same culture and/or worldview. In sum, in supervision, a doctoral student's culture becomes significant as it provides meaning and context for both parts and influences every human being's expectations and perceptions. This leads to the need for culture competence among supervisors.

CULTURE COMPETENCE INFLUENCES THE QUALITY OF SUPERVISION

Cultural competence is a skill-focused paradigm. However, it is often a hidden part of the doctoral training and may help us understand cultural similarities as well as differences, and ease communication between the supervisor and the doctoral student with their different ways of understanding the doctoral training process. According to Clark, Zuk and Baramée (2000) cultural competence is attained by translating knowledge and experience about, for instance, a doctoral student or a colleague into specific practices and policies that are shown in a cultural context. Such cultural dimensions are not equivalent with ethnic boundaries.

In supervision, cultural and ethic competency means encountering doctoral students and colleagues from different ethnic, religious and racial backgrounds, but with oneself as the point of departure. Cultural competence includes attitudes, knowledge and skills. Attitudes of the doctoral student and the supervisor belong to methods of learning, mindfulness, empathy and external factors that influence behaviour. Knowledge is about the culture, living conditions, rights, responsibilities and duties in the country of the doctoral student and host country, respectively. Skills include communication and assessment tools in interaction between the doctoral student and the supervisor/s. According to Bullock "Cultural competence and cultural sensitivity have at their core the assumption that diversity compels multiple perspectives" (Bullock, 2006). This observation is useful in asking how medical universities can be efficient (a positive direction) in the international supervising arena.

EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL AND PROBLEMATIC SUPERVISION Besides the external influence of globalisation on supervision, it is also vulnerable due to the inherent power-relation between the doctoral student and the supervisor. The role of the supervisor is not only to guide the doctoral student to completion of a doctoral dissertation but also includes an understanding of the doctoral student's culture, worldview and inner world. The view of the Karolinska Institutet's Ethical Council is that the supervisor's role is to promote trusting collaboration that contributes to the development of those involved; to help develop personal responsibility, and to clarify expectations, roles and realistic plans. The handbook for Successful Supervision - A Dialogue Facilitator (Karolinska Institutet, *online*) has been developed as an aid throughout postgraduate education at the Karolinska Institutet and has recently been mirrored from a culture and linguistic perspective in relation to ethics in a complementary document entitled "Karolinska Institutet's ethical policy for supervision of doctoral students from other countries and cultures" (Karolinska Institutet, *online*). Supervision of foreign doctoral students is vulnerable because of the inherent power-relation. Thus, culture competence in relation to ethics is of importance, especially when dealing with questions like: "How shall I relate to the doctoral student and the local supervisor? How can I best meet the doctoral student's and local supervisor's needs? What is the extent of my responsibility to this doctoral student and the local supervisor?"

What are the consequences of my actions for my doctoral student and other key persons? What do the doctoral student and the local supervisor know about Karolinska Institutet and Swedish living conditions, rights, responsibilities and duties? What do I as a supervisor know about the culture, worldview, living conditions, rights, responsibilities and duties in the country of my doctoral student and my local supervisor? What do I do if problems arise?

According to the policy, successful supervision can only be attained by adhering to key principles involving quality, respect and contextual sharing, reciprocity and coherence, and justice. Examples of successful and problematic supervision are described in Table 1. The following section presents lessons learnt from the training of supervisors with regard to how to solve ethical dilemmas.

Table 1. Ethical dilemmas and examples of successful and problematic supervision

| Ethical dilemmas | Problematic supervision | Successful supervision |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| <i>Quality(excellence)</i> | When he/she is not evaluating the resources and benefits of the research study - this will not promote mutual understanding of responsibilities, roles and needs. | When he/she is being updated regarding evidence-based knowledge, is a good model as a researcher, to not supervise more students than he/she can pay attention to. |
| <i>Respect and contextual sharing</i> | <p>Inequalities in power and pronounced differences in status between the sexes and/or ages.</p> <p>The supervisor makes use of students in a dependent relationship such as non-professional relations, illegal and/or unsuitable behaviours with doctoral students.</p> <p>Doctoral student's perception of time and hierarchies and having difficulties in adapting to the host academic culture and harmonizing with the research group. Having language problems and lack of knowledge of the university system and postgraduate training.</p> <p>The doctoral student is separated from the family for a long period.</p> | <p>Being physically exposed to a contextual sharing of social and environmental settings (visits):</p> <p>A serious motivation to understand each others' thinking, being and working.</p> <p>Intellectual property including authorship of all publications agreed upon and acknowledged at the beginning.</p> <p>Relevant study materials and information are translated into an international scientific language.</p> <p>There is easy access to English and/or local language course (especially when studying for longer periods).</p> <p>Leisure time is addressed.</p> |
| <i>Reciprocity and coherence</i> | <p>There are unclear roles, values, and similarities. The university collaborators are only regarded as collectors of data and not full partners in research.</p> <p>Results from the research are not shared with professionals, study participants in other countries and cultures, funding agencies and supervisor's colleagues.</p> <p>No transparency in the research process, and lack of informed consent. Policy makers in other countries and cultures are not included in any dissemination plan.</p> <p>There is no post doc in the plan.</p> | <p>The participation of all collaborators as equal partners helps to ensure that the proposed research is acceptable and relevant to the context settings.</p> |
| <i>Justice</i> | <p>The supervisor does not give recognition to those who contribute with ideas and material. Supervisors fails to listen carefully regardless of whether or not they approve – to not show equity to doctoral students.</p> | <p>Approval from ethical committee from all contexts involved before the study starts. There is an Ethical Council and doctoral Ombudsman at every context.</p> <p>The universities follow a human rights perspective which originates in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948).</p> |

LESSONS LEARNT There is a recommendation that both parts strive to understand each other's context (i.e. supervisor/s and the doctoral student) before registration for doctoral training. The role, responsibility and economic resources must be clear for both the main and the local supervisors; also the doctoral student's role, responsibility, economic compensation and if full-time studies or less are relevant. In a summary article (Ekblad, 2006) for the First World Congress on Culture Psychiatry in September in Beijing, China, it was suggested that the following checklist, with a supervisor perspective, be used prior to registration and decisions about supervision:

- ♦ “The budget for the postgraduate studies (specific contents). Consideration of the extent of the doctoral student's teaching duties.
- ♦ Visit the doctoral student's home country (individual-group context, private-working conditions, social and family life including children, gender, authority, politics, university organisation, lab and office including technical equipment, local supervisor, ethical approval, pedagogic, forms for dissertation, research opportunities, who is owner of the data, how to bring lab data and completed questionnaires out of the country).
- ♦ Preparation for half a year from both sides during application process. Is the academic and practical experience relevant? Local supervisor and the student visit the host university together.
- ♦ Prepare the research group at both sides”.

Last but not least, there is a need for an annual platform of reflection together with other doctoral students and supervisor colleagues, reflecting on critical questions and being mindful and open to “the other side of the coin” instead of a “one-way supervision” channel. Here the reader can check his or her own intuition by reflecting upon the following critical questions with reference to what may have been written in the diary during the supervision:

- ♦ *How did my age, sex and cultural and social background influence this doctoral student and the local supervisor?*
- ♦ *How did geographical distance influence the supervision?*
- ♦ *What has functioned well, what can be improved?*
- ♦ *To supervise but not take over, what did it mean?*
- ♦ *Accessible as supervisor and accessibility of other key people?*
- ♦ *Dependent relationship between postgraduate student and the “official” supervisors?*
- ♦ *Expectations from the home country / postgraduate student / host university / supervisor during and after the dissertation?*

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